Managing conflict in the workplace

Any good manager knows employee conflict is not simply the problem of the participants – it's yours, too. Discord affects the entire work environment, from disrupting teamwork and productivity to making staff members uncomfortable or pressured to choose a side. Ending tensions is in everyone's best interest.

But another thing every manager knows is that easing conflict in the workplace rarely occurs with a simple snap of the fingers, especially in situations where negative feelings run high. The resolution process takes thought and effort.

Here, we offer some top tips for leaders facing the challenge of managing conflict.

Encourage communication

Develop a company culture where employees know they should attempt to handle conflict on their own using their communication skills. Conflicts often result from misunderstandings, poor communication, and assuming intentions. When opposite sides actually sit down to talk, they sometimes discover their perception or interpretation differs from reality. Rachel wasn't trying to snub Alex; nobody informed her to add him to the email chain for the ZYX project. Without asking her about the omission, Alex would continue to walk around erroneously believing she wanted to sabotage his career.

Meeting face-to-face enables the sides to get to the root of the problem and clear the air. When grievances get put on the table, the participants may even find out that they differ in what they thought the other was mad

about! Stress that professionals avoid passive-aggressive behavior in favor of direct, respectful communication that promotes resolution.

Offer mediation

When team members experience difficulty resolving workplace conflict on their own, a manager or human resources representative can serve as a mediator. This third party does not act as a judge and deliver a verdict. Rather, this person aims to facilitate effective communication.

The mere presence of someone else often gets involved parties to act better. The meditator gives each person a chance to express his or her side and encourages active listening by the other. The mediator may point out common ground that sparring individuals overlook. Most importantly, the meditator keeps people on track to work out how to move forward instead of focusing on who is right or wrong.

Follow company policy

Conflicts can go so far as to require formal disciplinary procedures. A staff member who routinely picks fights, can't work harmoniously with others, or refuses to let go of a grudge may need the wake-up call of a reprimand before changing ways. Consult company policy for what steps to take and how to document. Many organizations employ progressive discipline, starting with a verbal warning and moving on to written ones with increasing consequences for failure to improve.

Managers getting wind of conflicts involving bullying, harassment, threats, violence, or any other inappropriate behavior must take action immediately. Again, follow company policy. Handling conflict "by the book" in these situations is extremely important because of potential legal issues.

Take proactive measures

People fight over many things, and it is impossible to control all factors that could contribute to tensions. However, good outcomes often result when leaders do what they can to recognize sources of potential conflict

and keep problems from occurring in the first place.

Got two team members with clashing personalities? Assign them to different projects whenever possible to limit butting heads. Tired of break room arguments over "hot button" issues spilling into the working environment? Ask human resources to send a memo reminding employees to refrain from political talk on the premises.

A type of discord known as task conflict occurs when the way a worker sees his responsibilities and how to carry them out differs from what a manager or co-worker wants. Leaders can proactively reduce task conflict by:

- Creating good job descriptions that spell out duties and expectations in detail

- Clarifying roles in projects so colleagues don't step on one another's toes or argue about who is responsible for what

- Evaluating deadlines and workloads for manageability

- Realizing interdependency (one person's work depending on the timely or thorough completion of another person's work) is a breeding ground for conflict and managing accordingly

- Getting on the same page as other managers when you "share" employees in order to keep workers from getting angry or confused by conflicting demands

- Explaining the reasoning behind decisions or policies rather than demanding people accept change

- Keeping an open door so that small issues can be brought to attention before they fester into larger ones

Adapt your leadership style

Managers possess different ways of doing things. They vary in factors such as decisiveness, strictness, amount and type of feedback given, approachability, and degree of involvement. Employees too have their own work styles. For instance, some like the challenge of problem-solving on their own; others want more direction. Or, the slow and steady pace that makes one worker feel calm and in control bores a colleague who thrives on pressure.

Style differences can be a source of tension between a manager inclined one way and an employee favoring the opposite. Think about your tendencies and those of your staff members. How might you tweak your behavior to better accommodate? Conflicts may occur less often if you resist your micromanaging inclination when dealing with someone who craves independence. Or, respect an overly meticulous worker's need for extra time to complete an assignment by scheduling it in from the start.

Prioritize emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills

When was the last time you commended someone for the ability to smooth over a touchy situation? Let team members know that you value such soft skills as much as (or perhaps even more than) hard skills. People will put more emphasis on acquiring them when they see evidence that these abilities get noticed.

Regularly talk about the importance of boosting emotional intelligence – the ability to recognize and effectively manage one's own feelings and to understand the emotions of others. Encourage team members to read books on the subject, watch TED talks, perhaps even take a seminar. Consider bringing a relevant speaker or trainer to the office.

Make an evaluation of conflict resolution skills part of the annual performance review template. This action sends a message about its importance. It also offers a natural opportunity to discuss improvement with individuals lacking in this area. Together, set SMART goals as you would for any job-related deficiency. Show how emotional intelligence fits into the overall scenario of professional and personal development.

Be a good role model

Lastly, always keep in mind that managers set the tone for their team. Act the way you want others to act. Ask rather than assume. Take five to cool off when you feel anger rising. Avoid yelling, name-calling, personal attacks, swearing, public confrontations, and other behaviors that escalate tensions.

And approach all interactions with a positive attitude rather than a confrontational one. Start conversations with the assumption that the other person has good intentions. This action lays the foundation for clarity, understanding, and (if needed) mutual desire to find a peaceful resolution.